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AUTHOR Enerson, Diane M.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s, Pennsylvania State University's IDP (Instructional Development Program) Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching provided separate programs for training teaching assistants (TAs) and faculty development. Neither program appeared to meet the needs of its intended audience. In the fll of 1992, the Center began offering the "Penn State Course in College Teaching" to all faculty, TAs, and instructors. The program has evolved into a highly successful noncredit course that meets once a week to explore issues of pedagogy, share teaching experiences, and discuss some of the current literature on teaching. The goal of the course is not to teach how to teach, but rather to develop the analytical and problem-solving skills that would enable continued growth and development. The course combines elements of a teaching practicum with those of a seminar on pedagogy. Course materials include weekly session guides, assignment sheets and two texts. Each week the course focuses on one of the basic processes of teaching; the assignments are designed to promote self-reflection and practical application. Feedback from both new instructors and experienced faculty indicate the success of the program in encouraging teachers to bring their scholarly abilities to their roles as teachers. (ND)

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Creating a Community of Teachers:

The Penn State Course in College Teaching

Based on a presentation at NCTLA's conference,

"What Works II: Postsecondary Education in the 21st Century"

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by

Diane M. Enerson

Kathryn M. Plank

R. Neill Johnson

The IDP Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching

The Pennsylvania State University

401 Grange Building

University Park, PA 16802

(814) 863-2599

idp@psu.edu

http://www.psu.edu:80/academic/ue/IDP_Homepage.html

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Creating a Community of Teachers: The Penn State Course in College Teaching

In the early 1990s, Penn State's IDP Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching[1], like many university-wide programs, kept "TA training" largely separate from "faculty development." This structure was problematic. Not only did the word "training" imply a kind of passive conditioning, but it also disconnected graduate students' early teaching experiences from their professional development as future faculty. Too often, instructional support for TAs simply means providing survival tips to help them deal with the necessary evils of an assistantship, rather than facilitating their development as teachers. Not surprisingly, while many TAs who participated in our programs reported increased confidence and comfort on entering the classroom, few indicated that the program had had any real, long-term impact on their teaching.

Faculty development activities, while less formally organized—often consisting of individualized consultation—seemed to have considerably more prestige. Nevertheless, even with the option of one-on-one consultation, faculty frequently would "sneak" into the less prestigious TA programs. This led us to wonder whether we could develop a sequence of activities that would simultaneously address the needs of both faculty and TAs. And would such a program attract those who teach at Penn State? In an attempt to find answers to these questions, we developed the Penn State Course in College Teaching.

In the fall of 1992, IDP began offering the course to all Penn State faculty, TAs, and instructors. What began as a simple attempt to serve two populations simultaneously evolved into a highly successful noncredit course that meets once a week for ten weeks to explore issues of pedagogy, share teaching experiences, and discuss some of the current literature on teaching. Some of the goals of the course are for individual participants to

- think self-reflectively about their aims as teachers and begin the process of articulating their philosophy of teaching

- design and critique classroom activities that are consistent with their basic beliefs about teaching
- develop good strategies for collecting and interpreting student feedback
- learn how to make informed decisions about changes and innovations
- select one aspect of their teaching to focus on in the coming year, set reasonable goals, and decide how to measure their progress
- become familiar with the teaching portfolio as a means of professional development

In sum, the goal of the course is not to "teach how to teach," but to develop the analytical and problem-solving skills that would enable continued growth and development.

Over the last four years, we have revised and fine-tuned the course, based on feedback from participants. In its present form, the Course in College Teaching combines the best elements of a teaching practicum with those of a seminar on pedagogy. Like a practicum, it focuses on classroom applications of knowledge that participants already possess as well as new ideas garnered from others taking the course. Like a seminar, it includes reading and discussion around pedagogical issues.

A major part of the course's evolution has been the development of the course materials that provide consistency between sections while allowing individual instructors a good deal of flexibility. This is particularly important since the course is taught not only by members of the IDP Center's staff, but also by IDP Teaching Fellows.[2] The materials include a packet of articles, weekly session guides, assignments sheets, and two texts—Wilbert McKeachie's *Teaching Tips* and our own handbook, *The Penn State Teacher: A Collection of Readings and Practical Advice for Beginning Teachers*. All of the selected reading assignments are easily accessible to a lay audience, with a minimum of education jargon. They also should provide balanced and sound advice about teaching and/or open up some of the more philosophical questions, such as "What is good teaching?" Using readings as the basis for dispensing expert advice allows for fuller and more productive

discussions than would be possible otherwise. It also eliminates the questioning of authority that can be a problem in some programs. The leaders of the course do not have to claim to be experts, but rather colleagues and discussion leaders.

Each week of the course focuses on one of the basic processes of teaching, such as "Designing Classroom Activities That Promote Learning," "Collecting Feedback to Improve Teaching and Learning," and "Measuring and Evaluating Student Learning." With assigned readings providing a common basis of theory and advice, participants share their own experiences and ideas, design and implement various instructional activities, and develop strategies for assessing teaching and learning. A typical session begins with a brief discussion of the week's readings, followed by a broader discussion or some kind of hands-on activity relating to the assigned topic. To develop a collaborative learning environment, participants are asked to help plan a discussion or hands-on activity for one of the class sessions.

Because the primary goals of this course are self-reflection and practical application, the various assignments have been designed to provide the opportunity to do both. The assignments fall into two categories. First, each week there are readings, questions, and activities to help participants reflect on the issues and articulate their ideas. For example, in Week 4, "Designing Classroom Activities That Promote Learning," participants read three chapters from *Teaching Tips* on learning processes. The weekly session guide asks participants to consider the following questions as they read:

- On page 290, McKeachie states, "Instructors teach students not only the knowledge of history, biology, or psychology but also structures, modes of thought, and strategies for learning." What are the important structures, modes, and strategies in your subject? How can you teach them to your students?
- According to McKeachie, "at least three elements of teaching seem to make a difference in student gains in thinking skills: (1) student writing and discussion, (2) explicit emphasis on problem-solving procedures and methods using varied

examples, and (3) verbalization of methods and strategies to encourage development of metacognition" (p. 372). How can you incorporate each of these three elements in the class that you teach?

These questions provide a focus for reading as well as a starting point for the session's discussion and activities.

The second category of assignments are those that we believe are integral to good teaching: planning a class session, collecting student feedback, and revising a course. Hence, these three assignments are required for the IDP Certificate. Most important, each assignment is accompanied by a one-page analysis, which focuses attention on the *processes* of good teaching, and not just its products.

For example, the assignment collected in Week 4 (described above) is to complete a session plan. However, this does *not* mean that participants have to construct an elaborate, three-page, color-coded plan that they would never actually use in a real classroom. Session plans are as individual as teachers themselves. As anyone who has ever temporarily taken someone else's class knows, more thinking goes into planning a session than can be captured on any outline. Since we cannot possibly know everything about the planning *process* by looking at the plan, we ask participants to write a brief analysis of the plan. This gives them the opportunity to reflect on all the problem-solving and decision-making that went into planning the session but is not necessarily recorded in the plan itself. In the analysis, they may answer questions like:

- What were your objectives for this session? How does this particular lesson fit in with your overall course goals?
- How did you decide what subject material to include and what teaching methods to use? What factors influenced these decisions?
- Which of your fundamental beliefs about teaching are at work in this session plan?

- How are you going to determine whether or not the plan worked—or which parts were successful and which were not?

It is this analysis that gets responded to and commented on.

These analyses also provide participants with the first step toward building individual teaching portfolios. Throughout the course, we emphasize that teaching is a complex, scholarly activity that needs to be evaluated accordingly. Thus we encourage participants to begin assembling the components of a teaching portfolio that can document their development as teachers.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this course is that it is open to anyone who teaches at the University, from TAs with only one semester of teaching experience to senior faculty. Because we believe that teaching is a form of scholarship, and thus like all other elements of the profession a subject of life-long learning, we start with the assumption that everyone has something to offer and something to learn. Feedback from participants tells us that this is in fact happening, as the following excerpted comments show:

- "The most profound thing I can take away is the sense that good teaching and confidence in your ability come from a continual self-evaluation and revising process. I was surprised at the number of 'experienced' teachers who were in this class. I thought it would be all new teachers or TAs."
- "I like sharing ideas with [those in] other disciplines even though at first I thought we would have nothing in common."
- "I really liked the opportunity to learn from others. Finding out their problems, sharing mine, and finding solutions."

In its present form the course is an interdisciplinary and multigenerational community for teachers, a community that is practical, supportive, and scholarly, where discussion is always lively and productive.

At another level, the impact of the course is clearly evident in the number of participants who report changing the way they teach as a result of taking the course. For

example, one senior and well-regarded faculty member with over 25 years of experience reported, "I did a midsemester evaluation for the first time last week. One of the best things I have ever done. It will become a regular part of my teaching." Another teacher responded, "This course sort of steers you through your weakness and strength. Puts thoughts, philosophies, goals and objectives into action."

Thus, in response to the question of whether we could design a program to fit the needs of both faculty and TAs, the answer is "yes." Furthermore, we discovered that people would take it. To date, 389 faculty, instructors, and TAs have voluntarily taken the course. Because we are not a credit-bearing unit, we cannot give credit for the course. All we can offer is an IDP Certificate. So what motivates people to invest the time and effort necessary to participate in this course? What's the secret? One of the keys to this success seems to lie in the fact that the course engages each of its members in active participation. It is also clear that because we emphasize process instead of product, participants find the course intrinsically motivating. It changes not just the way they think about teaching but the way they teach.

Perhaps the best expression of this, however, comes from the course participants themselves. Their feedback reveals that the course has encouraged them to bring their scholarly abilities to their roles as teachers, "to constantly question why I do things the way I do," "to make time to *think* about your teaching philosophy, methods, etc.," and "to really think about our students and their needs in learning." The course has thus accomplished its goal of developing skills that will enable participants to continue growing as teachers. Or, in the words of another participant, "Teaching is a *process*. I can't just take an IDP course and instantly become 'Professor Fantastic'!"

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[1] Funded through the Office of Undergraduate Education, the IDP Center (formerly the Instructional Development Program) is a small, centrally located office that serves all teachers throughout the Penn State system.

[2] Teaching Fellows are faculty, TAs, or instructors from departments throughout the University who, in collaboration with the IDP Center for Excellence, teach University-wide programs that support instructional improvement at Penn State.